

• convenience stores



At your convenience in jam —and cereal and juice and gum and cake —packed Osborn's Country Store in Duxbury.
(Buzz Wadsworth staff photo)

WIDE VARIETY

At Osborn's Country Store on Route 53 in Duxbury, owner Greg Sanders keeps changing the merchandise. He sells all the regular convenience store items, but not long ago added video rentals, a small deli and a photocopy machine which customers can use for a nickel a copy.

Sanders said he makes his choices on what to stock after listening to the suppliers, and reading trade publications -- and then watches how customers react to a new line.

He isn't sure whether the videos will stay. "According to the trade journals, convenience stores are the second-largest market for video rentals. Number 3 is supermarkets. But I have to see how they do."

That watch-and-see attitude is typical of the independent owners. They are very aware that they can't provide all things for all people. What they can provide, however, happens to sell very well.

At Osborn's, a customer can make photocopies, buy a bottle of good liquor, get some fresh deli food, fill up the gas tank, and find a can of wood finish. The assortment is wide.

"I don't try to stock every food or brand, or all sizes," Sanders explained. "I'll stock the number one brand and fast-selling sizes. You can't buy all kinds of pasta, but you can buy spaghetti."

Osborn's benefits as well from its location in a residential neighborhood along busy Route 53. Until a small convenience store opened recently about a mile and a half away, there was no other store for miles in either direction.

There are convenience stores these days that offer helium balloons, gourmet foods, flowers and other specialty items. Owners all seem to agree that impulse items, like candy bars, offer the best profit margin -- which is why candy (and the revenue-producing cigarettes) are always at the front of the store, on the counter, right under the customer's nose.

One problem convenience stores all share is inflation. Wholesale prices, utilities, salaries and other expenses keep rising for the stores, but their prices have to stay at least somewhat competitive.

And, there are government regulations. Stores have had to find space for bottle returns, and put up with those cashing them in.

LOTTERY LARGESSE

But that aggravation is more than compensated by one word the government is also responsible for -- the Lottery.

When asked about the Lottery, most of the owner just smile.

They know a Lottery agent's license can turn a marginal retail outlet into a small goldmine.